



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Review of Maartje Abbenhuis, "An Age of Neutrals: Great Power Politics, 1815-1914"

**Citation for published version:**

Neff, S 2017, 'Review of Maartje Abbenhuis, "An Age of Neutrals: Great Power Politics, 1815-1914"', *The Journal of Modern History (JMH)*, vol. 89, no. 1, pp. 159-160. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690133>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1086/690133](https://doi.org/10.1086/690133)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

The Journal of Modern History (JMH)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is the accepted version of the following article: Maartje Abbenhuis, An Age of Neutrals: Great Power Politics, 1815–1914

Stephen C. Neff. The Journal of Modern History 2017 89:1, 159-160, which has been published in final form at <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/690133>.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.





THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### **Review of Maartje Abbenhuis, "An Age of Neutrals: Great Power Politics, 1815-1914"**

**Citation for published version:**

Neff, S 2016, 'Review of Maartje Abbenhuis, "An Age of Neutrals: Great Power Politics, 1815-1914"'  
Journal of Modern History.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Journal of Modern History

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



*An Age of Neutrals: Great Power Politics, 1815-1914*

Since the First World War, neutrality has suffered from a combination of discredit and neglect. This results chiefly from the collective-security ethos of the League of Nations and the United Nations, with their stress (at least theoretically) on active involvement of all the nations of the world in the defeat of aggressors. In such an atmosphere, neutrals have naturally fallen under suspicion as shirkers of their obligations to the community at large, as morally dubious profiteers at the expense of victims of aggression. Even prior to 1914, when neutrality commanded a higher status, the principal students of it were international lawyers, rather than of international-relations scholars. The reason for this was that neutrality was, of all areas of international law, the most richly detailed. It was something of a juridical theme park.

Maartje Abbenhuis has set about rescuing neutrality from the neglect of the Twentieth Century, as well as from the strangle-hold of the lawyers. His subject is neutrality in its golden age – the period 1815-1914 – and, more particularly, the role that it played in the great-power politics of that era. One of his major themes is the insistence that neutrality was not simply a refuge of small and weak states, but was an important, and continuing concern of even the major powers.

In this task, the author has succeeded admirably. In part, this is because he is scrupulously careful to avoid claiming too much for neutrality. He sees neutrality not as a “driving force” of great-power relations (237), but rather as “a historical barometer to test the nature of the international system at any moment in time” (23). In particular, it was an important instrument in the tool-chest of the Concert of Europe when it came to resolving or forestalling conflict.

International law recognises only one body of law on the subject of neutrality and consequently considers neutrality simply as a given fact, to which that body of law is mechanically applied. In other words, political context is entirely factored out *à priori*. Abbenhuis, on the contrary, puts the context firmly at the very center. In so doing, he distinguishes very ably between three types of neutrality. One is neutrality as a matter of international obligation, typically buttressed by great-power guarantees. The cases of Switzerland and Belgium are the best known, but Abbenhuis treats of others, such as Luxembourg and the Ionian Islands. Here, the great powers play the roles instigators and guarantors of neutrality, rather than of neutral powers themselves. The author includes demilitarisation arrangements under the category of neutralisation, thereby allowing the Aaland Islands to be included. His description of the little-known case of Moresnet in Belgium is a gem. The second type of neutrality is consistent neutrality as a home-grown or self-adopted policy. Here, the best known examples are the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries, as well as the United States. These first two types of neutrality may fairly be said to be the preserve of weaker powers, and especially of weaker powers with significant maritime trading interests.

The third type of neutrality is what Abbenhuis calls occasional neutrality, meaning neutrality which is adopted strictly on an ad hoc basis, in response to the particular context of a specific war. It is as occasional neutrals that the major powers figure, most notably in the Crimean War, in which Austria and Prussia were neutral, and the Franco-Prussian War, in which Britain, Austria and Russia were neutral. The author's accounts of the issues and concerns of neutrality in those two conflicts are nothing short of masterful.

The author is notably insightful on the subject of occasional neutrality, which inevitably placed the major powers on both sides of the ongoing tug-of-war between rights of neutrals and rights of belligerents – categories which had a fluctuating rather than a fixed membership.

The consequence was that even the greatest powers had a genuine interest in striking a fair balance between the rights and interests of the two groups. This is covered in detail in the accounts of the codifications of neutrality law at the Second Hague Peace Conference in 1907 and in the London Naval Conference of 1908-09.

In passing, it may be noted that some small errors creep in. It is not correct to say that the Declaration of Paris (of 1856) abrogated the Rule of 1756 (which barred neutrals from engaging in trades which had been closed to them during peacetime). In fact, the validity of the Rule was not determined by the Declaration; and it remained contested even after the Declaration of London (of 1909). Also, the Brussels *projet* of 1874 (as it is properly labelled), on the laws of war, was not a convention. That is to say, it was not intended to be a treaty that would be ratified by states, but rather to be a summation of the law by experts in the field. Nor is it correct to say the United States declared war on the Philippines in the insurrection of 1899-1902. Also, the Hague Convention on Neutrality in Land War (1907) does not explicitly require military defence of neutrality. Instead, it requires neutral states not to “allow” various belligerent acts to occur in their territories; and it states that any forcible defence of neutrality cannot be regarded as a hostile act. But these minor slips are of no consequence to the author’s general theme.

The book is well written and admirably clear of technical jargon from either international law or international relations. Moreover, Abbenhuis is the most generous and congenial of authors, carefully crediting works of previous writers by name (including this reviewer). In sum, this a superb book that brings an important new perspective onto the world of great-power relations in the Nineteenth Century, and gives a vivid insight into the interworkings of international law and politics in that period.

Stephen C. Neff

University of Edinburgh

School of Law